



Can We Really Trust That We Will Go to Heaven?

TEXT
2 Timothy 4:6–8

February 3, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. It raises questions, doesn't it? What do you think heaven is like? Jesus said it's like a mansion with a room reserved for you. Or it's a wedding banquet where love is celebrated. Paul says it's a crown of righteousness, one that God is waiting to give you.

None of that can be taken literally. Heaven is not one big house or a crowd of folks wearing crowns. If nothing else, these texts demonstrate just how hard it is to talk about heaven.

I don't know much about heaven. But you asked, so I will tell you what I believe.

My friend Jon is a part my continuing education group, the Moveable Feast. He is a brilliant man and one of the most trustworthy pastors I know. Our group meets every year to study scripture. Every year, when we come to Easter, Jon asks our visiting scholar, "What do you think happened in the resurrection?"

We all have questions about that. And there is no available answer to such a question, but still we have them. Jon's questions began when he was a kid living in St. Joseph, Missouri, and his father was diagnosed with colon

cancer. In those days, Jon says, you just took morphine every few hours and hoped the end came quickly.

It was then that he began to wonder, when death comes, what happens to whatever it is that makes you *you*?

Jon said, "After a lifetime of ministry, my question has changed. It is not 'What happen[s] in the resurrection?' but rather 'How good is God?'"

He said, "If God is good enough to make the heavens and the earth; if God can breathe into us the breath of life, and has the time to count all the hairs on our head; if God can intricately form our amazing youthful and amazingly aging bodies, push the blood through our veins, and form the muscles in our arms, and shape the bones in our toes; if God can love the likes of us enough to take on flesh and blood and die forsaken on a cross, then nothing is too wonderful for our God." Jon said, "That's the answer behind the question ... How good is God?"¹

What I know is that you and me, and the whole earth for that matter, we are all creatures. As creatures, we have a beginning, and we have an end. When the end comes, there is only God. So, what you believe about heaven is

directly related to how good you believe God to be.

I want to tell you today what I believe about the goodness of God.

Henry Nowen was a Catholic priest, spiritual giant and university professor. He was also friends of some circus trapeze artists known as the "Flying Rodeighs." Nowen saw them perform once and was enraptured by their strength and grace. He sought them out and befriended them.

Nowen said, "One day, I was sitting with Rodeigh, the leader of the troupe, talking about flying. He said, 'The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze [because I fly through the air], but the real star is Joe, my catcher. The secret, Rodeigh said, is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. ... I am not supposed to catch Joe. It's Joe's task to catch me. If I grabbed Joe's wrists, I might break them, or he might break mine, and that would be the end for both of us. The flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that his catcher will be there for him.'"

Then Nowen said, "Dying is trusting in the catcher. ... Don't be afraid. Remember that you are the beloved child of God. He will

be there when you make your long jump. Don't try to grab him; he will grab you." You can trust in the goodness of God.

I'll tell you why I believe this. It's the witness of scripture. That's important. But it is palpable with me now because like you, from time to time, I have known what it is to grieve, to have my heart broken. And my own experience of grief has informed my trust in heaven.

This is what I mean.

In Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible*, Nathan Price travels in 1959 with his wife and four daughters to the Congo to serve as a missionary. They face many trials, but the point that brings them back home is the death of the youngest child, Ruth May. She is bitten by a poisonous snake and dies in minutes.

Rachel, the firstborn, says this: "The whole world ... changed then, and nothing would ever be all right again. Not for our family. All the other people in the whole wide world might go on about their business, but for us it would never be normal again."²

Grief feels like that. When we grieve, it feels that nothing will ever be normal again. We grieve because we love. Grief is what love looks like when death has pulled us apart. And the instinct of grief is to hold on because the nature of love is to hold on. When death comes, we grieve because love wants to keep us together. If we did not love, death would leave us unaffected.

The most consistent thing Jesus taught us of God is that

God is love — so God holds on. Because God loves, God grants death no power to pull us from God. Heaven is the logical result of a God who loves.

At most memorial services we read the 23rd Psalm. Have you paid attention to how individual this is?

The Lord is *my* shepherd ...

I shall not want ...

He makes *me*...

He leads *me* ...

He restores *me* ...

He is with *me* ...

And *I* shall dwell

Psalm 23 is a love song. And love is never abstract. Love only lives in specific relationships. We don't love humanity; we love people with names and faces and needs. Love only lives in the particular — which means, God does not just love; God loves you, by name. So when death comes, God cannot bear for you to be lost or forgotten. No, to lose you would break God's heart. So, God holds on to you.

When the end comes, there is only God — a God who does not just love, but a God who loves you. It is that love that claims you by name; that will hold you fast and never let you go.

Paul says, "The time of my departure has come, and there is reserved for me a crown of righteousness." It's already reserved. It's just waiting for him. I don't think the crown is the point; I think the *waiting* is the point.

You know what it's like to wait for someone you love. To wait for a child to be born ... the love just builds and builds. To wait for a child coming home from college. To wait for

a spouse at the end of the day. To wait for a reunion with a friend long departed. Love waits. Paul says, God is like that. God is waiting for you.

Jim was an elder in the church I served in Florida. He was a realtor, and when Carol and I were moving to serve that fine congregation, he showed us houses.

We looked at a bazillion houses. This was the first time I realized that if you are a realtor, there's not a lot for you to do while Carol looks at the kitchen, and I check out the garage. We check the upstairs one more time. All the while Jim Baker just hangs around, acting as if there is nothing else he would rather do.

To give us space, he would hum — hymns mostly. He liked *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*. He didn't sing, but he would hum. I remember hearing him hum *Abide with Me*.

Do you know the words? *I fear no foe, with thee at hand to bless: Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness. Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory? I triumph still, if thou abide with me. When my time comes, sing that together, would you?*

Three years later, I went by Jim's house. He was dying. His wife Bebe had some fresh-squeezed lemonade. He was in a makeshift bed in the living room. "Go on in, Tom," she said. "He's waiting for you."

He didn't have enough breath left to hum, but pacing himself, he could speak. "The cancer's not going to let go of me, Tom. Doc says a week, maybe two. Then I'll be free from it. I want

you to say the words when my time comes.”

“I’ll say the words,” I said.

“You tell them that I’m okay. And tell them that I’m not afraid. I’m grateful for that. I worried that this might be a frightening thing; but I’m not afraid.”

“What do you think it will be like?” I asked.

“I’ve been thinking about that. There will be a sweet comfort to it, a real peaceful homecoming, I imagine. I’m ready. Oh, don’t get me wrong. I would love to hang around to pester Bebe and see who those grandchildren grow up to be. But I’m ready. I think this is the easy part now. You know, Tom, all I have to do is show up; Jesus will take care of the rest.”

In the end, there is only God, and God will catch you; you will not fall, you will not be lost, for God is waiting for you. For God does not just love; God loves you. Heaven is the only logical result of a God who loves you by name and will never let you go.

When the end comes, don’t be afraid. For God who fashioned the stars and breathed you to life, the God who took on flesh and who watches over you every day of your life, the God who filled the earth with beauty and who sprinkled your mind with curiosity and your heart with love, the God who does not just love, but who loves you ... that God is waiting. All you have to do is show up, and Jesus will take care of the rest.

shared in a paper presented to the Feast in January of 2018.

²Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (1999), p. 366

¹All of this conversation is from Jon Walton which he